Writing Military History

Christopher R. Gabel, Ph.D.

“How does one write military history?”

If I knew the answer to that, would I be working here?

Agenda

- General Techniques
- Research
- Writing

General Techniques

- Total immersion
- Simmer, don’t boil
- “Ideas” file
- Stay organized

Total Immersion

- Work on nothing else
- Live it, breathe it

Yeah, right

- Carve out blocks of time
- Don’t let it go cold
  - Failing that, leave notes for yourself

Simmer, Don’t Boil

- Pace yourself
- Allow time for ideas to formulate
  - Take long walks
  - Carry notebook
- *Eureka* moments rarely come when you’re hard at work
- Don’t write after 1800 hrs.

Dream on, pal

“Ideas” File

- Keep record of bright ideas
- Don’t trust your memory
- Discard rate: 75%
- *The best ideas come unbidden*

Stay Organized

- Make space: tabletop, not computer station
- Keep everything in one place
- File notes rationally
  - Cross-index by source/content
- Tidy up regularly
  - Reacquire “big picture”
  - Break writer’s block

Stay Organized?

Filing method: Geological

Research

- Wallowing
- Find the “kernel:” research question
- Focused research: note-taking

Research

- Step 1: Aimless wallowing
  - Read general works
  - Find the significant issues
  - Learn the names, dates, places
  - *Osmosis, minimal note-taking*
  - Begin generating bibliographic cards
    - *Complete* information

Research

- Step 2: Find the “kernel” (kick back and reflect)
  - What is the central issue?
  - What can I say about this that is new?
  - Default research question:
    - “What factors made this process/event turn out the way it did?”
    - “Which of those factors were most important?”
  - Answer to question = thesis statement

Bad Research Questions

- The choice of research question and design, and not the mishandling of evidence, is the root of most avoidable bias
- Even an honest inquiry into a biased or meaningless question will produce bad results

Bad Research Questions: 1

- “Why was Lee a great general?”
  - Presupposes that he was
  - “Why” questions can be answered non-empirically
  - Hagiography follows
- “What tenets of leadership did Lee follow?”
  - Presupposes that there are such universal tenets
  - What is proven if the tenet-writer used Lee as a model?
  - Tenets might be so vague as to fit anyone if you are selective enough

Bad Research Questions: 2

- “What were the contributions of Irish-Americans to the Civil War?”
  - Invites listing and narrative, not analysis
  - “Contributions” might mean anything
  - Camouflage for special agenda

Bad Research Questions: 3

- “A justification of Missouri Confederates in irregular operations”
  - Not a question
  - Deliberately one-sided to “counterbalance” “pro-Union” interpretations
    - Literary “pong” game
    - No truth can emerge from a debate between two fallacies
    - History should be heuristic

Bad Research Questions: 4

- "Was Lincoln a racist?"
  - Agenda inevitable
  - *Anachronism:* standards of 1990s NAACP applied to 1860; guilty verdict inevitable
- "What antecedents to AirLand battle did Napoleon practice?"
  - *Presentism:* misrepresents Napoleon by exclusion
  - Modern terminology carries baggage

Bad Research Questions: 5

- "A History of Confederate Uniforms"
  - *Antiquarianism*
  - Not a question; the "answer" can prove nothing
  - *Doesn't mean it won't sell!*

“Interpretation” and “Objectivity” Coexist

- Interpretation
  - Framing the research question: your call
  - Assessing the meaning of evidence
  - Structuring the argument: selectivity; emphasis
- Objectivity
  - Framing an open-ended question
  - Keeping an open mind
  - Adjusting argument as evidence dictates

Research

- Step 3: Focused research
  - Define specific subordinate questions
  - Search out specific bodies of information
  - Generate *tentative* thesis statement
  - Stay open-minded: evidence trumps opinion
  - Follow the footnote trail

Note-Taking

Advantages of Cards over Electrons

- Logistically simpler
- Take up less space at workplace
- Tangible sense of progress
- Easier to manipulate
  - Extract, re-sort, recombine
- Not software-dependent

Color-Coding Notes

- Primary/Archival
- Secondary/Monographs (published)
- Journals
- Reference
  - Data from reference sources
  - Data generated
    - Unit composition
    - Dates of rank

Notecard Format

Black, Robert C. 1

The Railroads of the Confederacy

Chapel Hill: UNC Pr, 1998 [1952]

17-18 Trains seldom > 15 cars, load limit per car 16,000 lbs. [Car itself 4,000 lbs]

20 PRR operated 220 locos betw Phila & Pittsb; more than all RRs in VA.

21 One cord of wood good for 50-60 mi.

22-23 Tredegar built 40+ locos by 1861 [see White, Loco]

23-24 RF&P built 3 locos before 1861. Richmond & Danville, Monty_ & West Point, Central of Ga built a few

31-32 Avg passenger speed on NC mail train, incl stops, 15 mph. [Poor track was main restriction on speed.]

37-38 At time of CW, southern RRs still feeders to water trans. True trunk lines were the waterways.

Use one side only. Cards are cheap

Cross-Indexing

Ch. 3	Ch. 4
Johnson 12	Haupt 22-29
Haupt 7-19	North 3
Weber 8, 11-13, 21	Clark 1-7
RG337 a22, J12-21	Black 23, 26, 29
ANJ 2, 21, 23	OR 15, 19-22

When laziness is a virtue, pt. 1

When you have enough information,

stop researching!

All written history is the 80% solution

“A historian cannot know what *really* happened, but he has the duty to try.”

David Hackett Fischer

Historians’ Fallacies

p. 43

Evaluating Evidence

- “Facts” need interpretation
  - A “fact” is the answer to a question—what was the question?
  - What assumptions underly the “fact?”
- Evidence should be *valid* and *pertinent to your question*

Interpreting a Fact

- Fact: "The British suffered 50% casualties on the first day of the Somme offensive"
  - "British" = British Empire? BEF? Second Army? Assault waves?
  - "Casualties" = killed? Killed + wounded? Killed + wounded + missing? Psychiatric? Treated and released?
  - How does this compare to other assaults?
  - *Fallacy: assuming that any given assault battalion suffered 50% casualties*

Evaluating Evidence: Pitfalls

- Beware “footnote momentum”
  - Consensus does not equal validity
- Beware “pragmatic” evidence
  - Evidence that applies to today may not be meaningful to your historical issue
- Don’t confuse “validity” with “conformity”
  - If valid evidence refutes your argument, fix your argument

Writing

- Outlining
- Composition

Breaking the Ice

- *Wrong:* cut and paste digitized notes
- *Wrong:* sit down with a pile of notecards and start composing complete sentences
- *Right:* OUTLINE!
  - Break project into manageable chunks
  - Conceptualize down to sentence level
  - Avoid organizing and composing simultaneously

Structure Options

"What made the Army of the Potomac lose?"

Chronological

- 1861
  - Organization
  - Doctrine
  - Leadership
- 1862
  - Organization
  - Doctrine

Etc.

Thematic

- Organization
  - 1861
  - 1862
  - 1863
- Doctrine
  - 1861
  - 1862

Etc.

Outline, Outline, Outline

1. Overall structure: kick back and reflect
2. Major sections (chapters)
3. Key concepts
    1. Rough-in information
    2. Sequence information
    3. Put in transitions

Run bottom-up feedback constantly:

Information supports section, section supports overall structure, structure supports thesis statement

Advantages of Legal Pad Over PC in Outlining

- Visualization
- Easier to manipulate and restructure concepts
- Pruning is psychologically easier
- Precludes temptation of premature composition

CSRR: Overall Structure

Thesis: CSRRs were all hosed up

1. State of inferiority, 1861
2. Inferior management during war
3. Wear and tear
4. US raids
5. State of collapse, 1865

CSRR: Key Concepts (rough)

- State of inferiority, 1861
  - *Stover, 19* 10,000 mi NE, 11,000 mi NW
  - *Stover, 21* 4 RRs Memphis-Va
  - *Stover, 186* State, municipal investment
  - *Johnston, 21* 6 RRs to Richmond, no interchange
  - *Turner, 12* 9,000 mi S, 21,000 mi N
  - *Bogart, 121, 230* RR miles Br, Fr, Ger

CSRR: Key Concepts (sequence)

- State of inferiority, 1861

2 – *Stover, 19* 10,000 mi NE, 11,000 mi NW

B – *Stover, 21* 4 RRs Memphis-Va

4 – *Stover, 186* State, municipal investment

A – *Johnston, 21* 6 RRs to Richmond, no interchange

Move next section

1 – *Turner, 12* 9,000 mi S, 21,000 mi N

3 – *Bogart, 121-230* RR miles Br, Fr, Ger

Eureka: CSRRs were adequate going in; died of neglect

Outlining Objectives

- Logical, persuasive organization
- Narrative flow
- Make all structural modifications
  - Right info, right place
- *Key creative step*
- *Makes composition easy*
  - Paragraphs and sentences are prefabricated
  - Now you can focus on artful composition

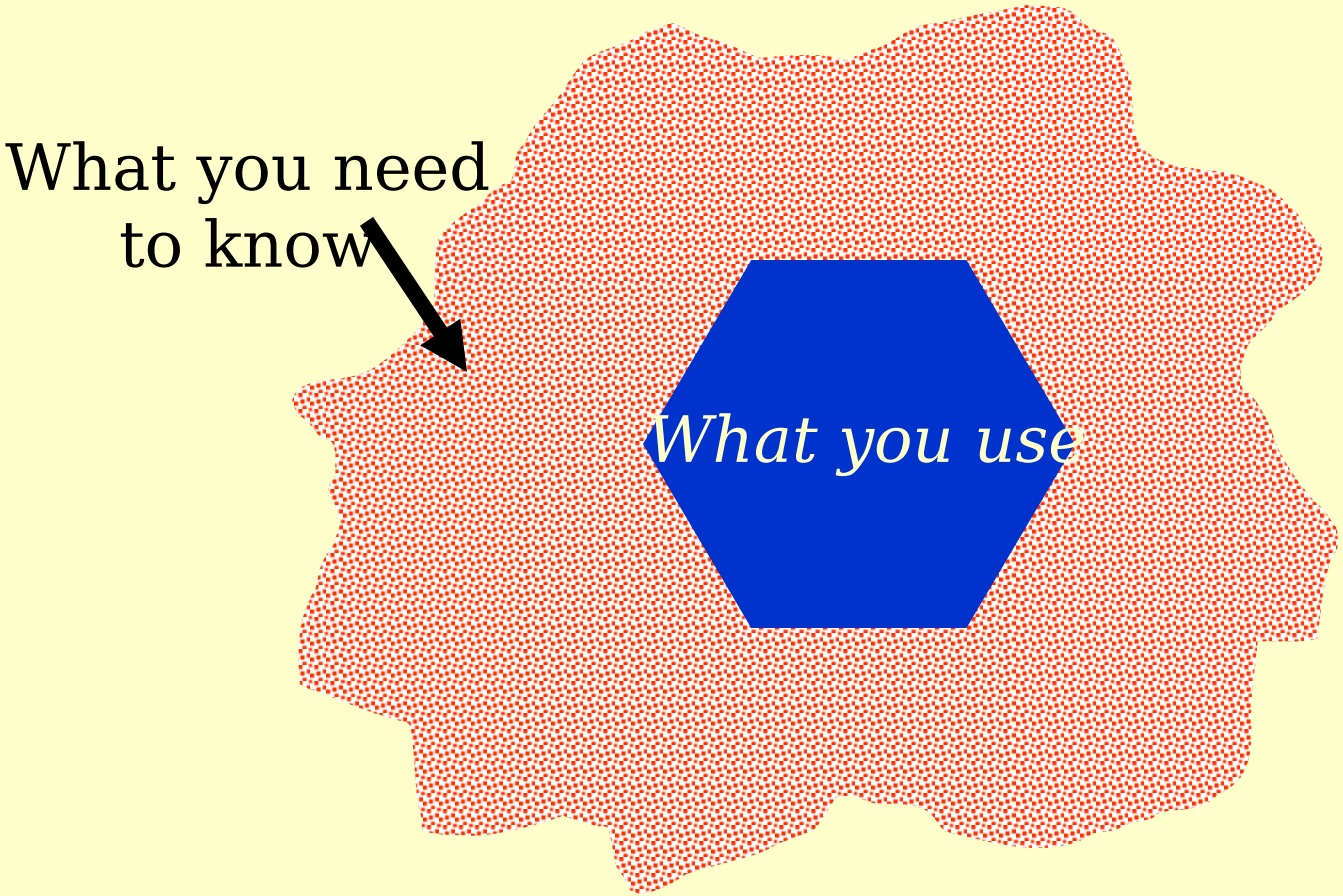
Safety Tip

- Avoid front-loading everything you know in the introduction
  - Symptom of “chapteritis”
  - Good outlining helps

When laziness is a virtue, pt. 2

Don’t feel obliged to write everything you know

Selectivity While Writing



Composition

- Suit the style to your audience
- Write for the ages
  - Avoid jargon and acronyms
- Simple and direct
- It is *your duty* to express your ideas well
- Not your readers duty to discern your true, though concealed, genius

Multiple Drafts

- First draft: legal pad
  - Easier to manipulate
  - If you write a passage, cross it out, then change your mind, the original is still there
  - Better visualization of overall product
- Second draft: digits
- *Multiple drafts improves "digestion," knocks off rough edges*

When laziness is a virtue, pt. 3

If the words just will not come, or if you are too sick of a passage to rewrite it

Try leaving it out altogether

Composition: The Conclusion

- *Adequate:* "Here's what I told you just in case you are too dense to remember what I wrote 60 pages ago"
  - (You might have written Chapter 1 three months ago, but the reader saw Chapter 1 an hour ago)
- *Better:* "So what? What larger issue does this essay inform? Here's why you should care"

Bad Review

"Your essay is both original and good. The parts that are good are not original, and the parts that are original are not good."